

Promises and Our Identity

What is a promise?

On a linguistic level, a promise is a commitment to fulfill a future action. A promise requires the participation of two or more people. The power of promises is that they help generate a future that may have not been possible without the involvement of other people. A promise is truly an action which binds us to each other.

When does a promise get created?

Request + Declaration of Acceptance = Promise

Offer + Declaration of Acceptance = Promise

When we either accept a request or another accepts our offer, we have made a promise to carry out a particular action. Beyond a declaration of acceptance, it is critical that we 'check out' that we have the same understanding about what has been asked for and agreed upon. We are all different observers and have very different ways of seeing and viewing the world. If we don't have the same understanding about what we're doing, we will likely not be able to coordinate action very effectively. Refer to the 'Elements of an Effective Request' worksheet from the April 2011 Practices for Cultivating Healthy Relationships blog that provides different aspects to check for agreement (i.e., standards, shared understanding of terminology, etc.) when having this conversation.

What's at stake for our identity when we promise?

Our public identity is largely affected based on our ability to make and manage our promises. When we are able to do this, we enjoy a positive public identity and are experienced as someone who is trustworthy. When we do not manage our promises, we are seen as untrustworthy and experience a negative identity. We may be considered insincere, incompetent, unreliable, or uninvolved – none of which are qualities for which we'd like to be known.

What do we do if we find we can't keep our promise?

There are times when we aren't able to keep our promise for numerous reasons. While it's best to do what you can to complete the task, if you find that it's impossible, you can renegotiate your promise. This involves going to the person to whom you made the promise as early as possible and having a conversation about how to proceed. Perhaps you need an extension, further clarification, or are under other unexpected deadlines and need to delegate the task. Having this conversation in a spirit of partnership – that is, acknowledging your agreement, taking your role seriously, and trying to find a resolution that will work for the other person will help preserve your identity and the relationship.

For more tips and practices for relationships, visit: <http://www.umbc.edu/wellness/relationships.html>

Adapted by Jill Weinknecht Wardell, UMBC Training & Organization Development

SOURCE: "[Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change.](#)" Alan Sieler. Newfield, Australia.

Promises Kept...Promises Broken

Promises Kept

- Think of a promise you've made that you were able to keep (e.g., either one that you completed as originally requested or one you renegotiated).
- What was the impact on your identity in keeping your promise?
- How were you received by others when you did this?
- What was the impact on your relationship?

Promises Broken

- Think of a promise you've made that you were not able to keep.
- How did you handle it?
- What was the impact of your choice (i.e., how you handled it) on your identity?
- How were you received by others when you did this?
- What was the impact on your relationship?
- What did you learn and what would you do differently next time?

Adapted by Jill Weinknecht Wardell, UMBC Training & Organization Development

SOURCE: "[Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change.](#)" Alan Sieler. Newfield, Australia.

Adapted by Jill Weinknecht Wardell, UMBC Training & Organization Development

SOURCE: ["Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change."](#) Alan Sieler. Newfield, Australia.